

Visit by Melli Annamalai, Asha-Boston/MIT

July 21 and 22, 2015

Karthi and 2 others came to receive me as I arrived by the overnight bus from Mysore. I went to my place of stay, and after refreshing myself was picked up again by the team and taken to Karumbalai. I spent more time than usual on this visit, and it gave me the opportunity to observe more activities/classes.

The first event on the agenda was the library session. Students read a book from the library and present to the others. They had picked topics on the environment, scientists. They mostly listened to the speaker silently. (They were vocal in other sessions, so they are not always passive listeners.) I asked a few questions to bring an element of analysis to the discussion.

Later that day I had a full session with the volunteers (college students who work with the center). Over the years they have developed a program where each volunteer is laser-focused on a group of students. They each spoke to me about what they are studying and what class they handle at the center. Some of them commute long distances to their colleges, but still find time to volunteer at the center. I was struck by how intense the desire to go to college was, and how families sacrifice everything for their children to do so. This is quite different from a rural area. In this urban area, if the student passes class X and XII and gets decent marks the families go all out to send them to college, including taking large loans to send them to private institutions. Private institutions have proliferated in Tamil Nadu, often of questionable quality, but charging high fees. Loans are easier to get (there are government schemes to support higher education), so families take the loans and send their children to any college they can get admission to.

College admission to good colleges is extremely stiff. Many government run colleges are considered good, as are the older aided colleges. Students who don't get admitted to these colleges only have the option of private ("self-financing") colleges of varying quality. On the positive side, these colleges do give them the degrees that are necessary for any job. For example, the government is hiring a lot of government school teachers, and this process appears to be corruption-free. Teachers are selected through tests, but require a B.Ed to qualify to take those tests. So the B.Ed degree is essential. Till the capacity increases in the good government colleges, there might not be any option but to go through these private colleges.

In summary, there is a palpable support for education in the community. Students and parents are looking for opportunities to help them learn better. Karthi considers this an achievement of the Seed centers. Other social factors have contributed also, but the Seed centers are critical for providing the guidance and support needed to enable the aspirations to become reality.

Coming back to the Seed Narpanigal centers. The team has developed material that helps them with the so-called "slow learners" (students who have fallen behind grade level). For example, they have ways to teach the alphabet to children in elementary school. It is unfortunate that the government

school system is so poor in quality that even the alphabet has to be taught by non-governmental organizations. The team was doing a good job in the class I visited.

Space continues to be a problem, with rising rents. I urged them to consider buying a place. With careful money management they have been able to save most of the donations they receive locally. Perhaps this could be used towards buying a place. This should be explored further. However any space within Karumbalai is likely to be small, so the situation of multiple classes sharing a room will continue.

A volunteer from Switzerland was staying with them and working with them for 2 months. I was quite impressed that she stayed right in Karumbalai. She was teaching English. She felt that the students know more English than might appear to an observer, one of the problems is they are shy to speak.

Karthi and team dropped me back at the bus station and I took the overnight bus back to Mysore.



*Some of the college student volunteers*



*Teaching the alphabet to the elementary classes*



*Students from classes 10, 11, 12*



Middle school classes



*Library hour discussion*